

Appleby Archaeology Group February 2006

At the February meeting of Appleby Archaeology, Trish Crompton, an archaeologist working with North Pennine Archaeology, spoke about the conservation and restoration work that has been done by North Pennine Heritage Trust to restore Dilston Castle and Chapel.

The Dilston site, lying south of the river Tyne 2-3 miles east of Hexham, consists of a partially derelict building with an associated chapel, which is virtually intact. The site is owned by MENCAP and in the stewardship of North Pennines Heritage Trust.

The history of the site goes back about 800 years. The castle, a fortified tower was built c1417 at the time of the Border raids. Relics of an earlier castle or manor house can be located in the present ruin. In the late 16th to early 17th century the tower was altered to become a more comfortable dwelling. Later it was incorporated into a grand mansion owned by James Radcliffe, 3rd Earl of Derwentwater. The Radcliffes of Dilston owned the manor for two centuries and were one of the prominent Roman Catholic families in the north of England. All was lost when the 3rd Earl took up arms to support his cousin, Prince James, in the 1715 Jacobite Rebellion. He was later found guilty of treason and beheaded as was his brother 30 years later. Most of the house was demolished in 1768 and the building that remains, in a derelict condition, was part of the original tower. The better preserved Dilston Chapel was built c1616 by Sir Francis Radcliffe, and is a rare example of a Reformation recusant chapel designed for Roman Catholic worship at a time when it was against the law.

English Heritage became interested in the site and decided to invest in a project to examine and consolidate the extant buildings and to produce a record of the site prior to, during and after conservation. At the same time the project would try to identify the different phases of the building over the centuries by examining documentary records, by digging a series of trial trenches and by recovering any artefacts, especially those that would assist in dating. The archaeological work was led by Frank Giecco of North Pennines Archaeology.

Trish referred to a series of handouts which included early maps of the site, copies of 18th century engravings of the hall and chapel, early architect's plans, and recent photographs of the ruins of the castle. The old plans of the castle showed the extent of the building and determined the positions of the trenches to try to establish the extent, complexity and depth of the remains.

A number of slides were shown to illustrate features of the castle and chapel before and after consolidation. The tops of walls exposed to the elements posed a major problem as did the mullions and sills of windows. All had to be made safe and any features conserved and restored using the appropriate materials for example lime mortar.

The chapel suffered less during the demolition. The roof, although almost intact, was leaking and needed replacing and in the process an earlier roof was found partially intact with bone pegs still holding the slates. Within the chapel, scars of the gallery, in which the Earl and his family would have sat were seen. That gallery is now reinstated and the interior of the chapel restored. Some excavation of the crypt was possible but limited by fourteen coffin rests, formed by pairs of brick piers. From documentary evidence it is known that six coffins were removed from the crypt in 1874 and that they dated from 1696 to 1726. An intact sealed lead coffin dated to the latter half of the 16th century was exposed but has not yet been opened. One trench revealed a medieval pot and neonate bones. One fascinating find was a collection of clothes possibly left hidden by a fleeing Jacobite.

Dilston Castle and Chapel were opened to the public in 2003 although much remains to be discovered. Further work is planned for the grounds, the carriage way to the hall, and for the restoration of the 17th century Lord's Bridge which spans Devil's Water below the hall.

There many questions from the floor and the chairman, in his vote of thanks, suggested that a site visit could be the best way to answer some of those questions.

The next meeting will be on the Tuesday 14th of March at 7.30pm in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby, when Russel Barnes will talk on *The Archaeology of the Second World War in Cumbria*